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HOLISTIC VERSUS COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH IN ASSESSING ORAL PRODUCTION IN ENGLISH

[Aproximación holística versus aproximación comunicativa en la evaluación de la producción oral en inglés]

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show the different communicative outputs in role-plays in two contrastive groups: students trained in integrative learning and students trained in communicative learning. The assessment of oral production carried out through a task-based approach to role-plays has shown that, even though communicative students master communicative techniques better than the integratively-taught group, the latter are more skilled in grammar. The students mean marking in the integrative group is not too far from the one obtained by the communicative group. We believe the reason for this is that integrative teaching fosters the use of linguistic skills which interact mutually.

Keywords

Integrative teaching, communicative teaching, oral production, role-playing.

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es mostrar el rendimiento comunicativo en las simulaciones en inglés en dos grupos contrastivos: estudiantes adiestrados en enseñanza integrativa en contraste con los que están siguiendo un curso de enfoque comunicativo. La evaluación de la producción oral mediante una aproximación por tareas a las actividades de simulación muestra que, aunque los estudiantes siguiendo el método comunicativo dominan mejor tales técnicas, los estudiantes del método integrativo son más aventajados en el dominio de la gramática. Sin embargo, la nota media de los alumnos del método integral no se encuentra demasiado alejada de la de los que han seguido el método comunicativo. La razón parece radicar en que el método holístico fomenta el uso de habilidades lingüísticas que interactúan entre sí.

Descriptores

Enseñanza integral, enseñanza comunicativa, producción oral, actividades de simulación.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the assessment of oral performance in role-plays in two contrastive groups: the first is composed of students trained in integrative teaching, whereas the second is formed by students who have

attended a course targeted to communicative English. It is necessary to provide verbal production in class activities, because, according to Edelsky (1989:97), 'language is a socially shared system for making meaning'. Savignon (1987) states that communicative competence in a foreign language seems to be related to anxiety, which magnifies the

problems in acquiring the target language. In Klippel's opinion (1984), the learner should participate in the learning process and, we do not want that some of our students behave as sheer spectators in oral activities.

Schumann (1980) and Vivanco (2002) highlight the important role of affective or psychological components in learning a foreign language; apart from that, attitude, motivation, empathy and liking towards the subject of study (Carter and Nunan, 2001; Cook, 2001; Dougherty et al., 2005; Gass and Selinker, 2008; Harmer, 2007; Hedge, 2000; Hoff, 2008; Saville-Troike, 2005) are foremost aspects that help the process of second-language acquisition. It is the teacher's must to develop these factors in the learning of a second language (Byram, 2000; Candlin and Mercer, 2000; Sparks and Ganschow, 2001; Spolsky, 2000; Wakamoto, 2000). In Curran's opinion (1972) many foreign language students feel anxious and nervous about learning a foreign language, negative factors which, undoubtedly, lead to worsening the output conditions in class and, also, in the real world practice. The attitude of the teacher is an essential point in the students psychological and social behaviour. Some solutions in order to develop a psychologically satisfying class may be, as Stern (1983) suggests to carry out role-plays or dramatic activities in the class. Our opinion is that, in this way, students feel they are in somebody else's position, which diminishes anxiety and embarrassment because they are not evaluated as students of a second language, but as actors who are playing an imaginary role.

Integrative teaching in the mixed-ability class

According to Krashen (1985), acquired language is more important than language learning. The fundamental difference is that acquired language is available for natural communication, whereas language learning belongs to a more artificial environment. Our opinion is that in our classes the two types of

language interact, because our students learn the new information we try to transmit in a way which is not devoid of the burden of acquired knowledge each of them has in his or her mental reservoir. However, traditional learning implies the combination of four skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) which interact with each other. From this point of view, our experience in the classroom is that it is difficult to isolate the teaching of one skill from the others, which takes us to the thought that reading, for example, has a strong influence and brings a lot of advantages to the other skills (Stern, 1983: 399).

Enright and McCloskey (1988) have designed what is known as Integrated Language Teaching (ILT), a teaching model for second language learners based on practical principles we try to apply:

1. Language is greater than the sum of its parts
2. The best way to learn a language is by using it, so practice is better than theory.
3. Everyday language is most useful to students in their learning development.
4. Students develop their second language skills at the same time.
5. When learning a language, students use linguistic and non linguistic resources, as much as their acquired knowledge and previous experience of the world.
6. Foreign language (and literacy) is developed by using it in many different situations, environments, with many different speakers and listeners, and for many purposes.
7. A comfortable and relaxing atmosphere, the one which values the transmission of meaning more than form, is the adequate setting to develop language and literacy.

Integrated teaching and learning have a global and ambitious objective, whereas communicative teaching may be considered as having a kind of specialized aim. We can establish other differences at the level of writing: communicatively trained pupils

have some mistakes in spelling, as opposed to integrated teaching students who seem to master spelling and writing better.

As in this case we follow an integrated type of teaching and, if we take into account the opinion of different authors, the role of oral production depends on the teacher (Bailey Savage, 1994; Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 1996); motivation of the speaker (Brown, 1994); the affective bond (Brown, 1994; Vivanco, 2002); the communication of new information (Lynch, 1996; Thompson, 1996); conversation knowledge (Rost, 1996) and, finally, communicative tasks (Lynch, 1996).

But oral production depends in a high degree not only upon reading but also on writing, which can be considered as previous and necessary skills in order to facilitate speaking in a non-native language. The learning and teaching of writing (Britton 1970, 1991; Britton et al., 1975, Martin et al., 1976; Newell, 1984; Newell and Winograd, 1989; Langer & Applebee, 1987) and talking (Barnes, 1976; Sweigart, 1991) have been object of prolific research. Also, the relation between talking and writing has been explored (Gere, 1987; Brandt and Nystrand, 1989), since writing is a skill that affects and is affected by the other three (Witte 1992).

Nystrand and Gamoran's (1991) system tests and Bellack et al., (1966) research revealed that teachers talk 75 % of the time available, whereas learners spend only a 25 % of the remaining time. This is another added problem in our classes and we really think that if the students are really warmed up when expressing their ideas, the percentage of time availability will be inverted. Motivation is, in our opinion, the factor that can eliminate most obstacles in the foreign language class and in learning in general.

The other linguistic skill in the integrated type of teaching is listening. A very important aspect of oral communication in English (more than in Spanish) is phonetics, which

includes pronunciation, suprasegmental features, voice quality, voice setting... In our classes, we follow Morley (1991) in the three types of practice in order to enhance phonetics: imitation, rehearsal and extemporaneous speech. The first one, imitation, needs the controlled production of speech features based on direct and natural listening or in technological means (audio or video tapes, computer programs, internet, etc.). Rehearsal implies a continuous imitation effort to produce fluent speech patterns. The number and quality of rehearsal activities leads to creative extemporaneous speech.

Some authors (Gumperz, 1982; Green, 1989) remark the bond between poor pronunciation and listening comprehension, but oral skills can also be improved by using written texts (Myers, 1995). To complement this, there are specific materials to teach suprasegmental features (Anderson-Hsieh, 1990). These are linguistic resources to develop phonetics, but, in some cases, extralinguistic reasons seem to be in the base of the problem of not having proficient pronunciation. Perhaps, a mean to activate the affective bond towards the subject of study may be promoting the culture and customs of the target language (Smith et al., 1992).

Also, repetition plays an important role in building fluency since it eliminates grammatical errors and improves sentence structures (Nation, 1989); it also contributes to store information and experience to make the students more proficient speakers (Brown et al., 1984). Hieke (1981) indicates that the rate of speaking increases whereas hesitation marks, repetitions and false starts decrease.

There are many theories on discourse and teaching students to build conversations (Blommaert, 2005; Have, 2007; Johnstone, 2008; Schiffrin and Tannen, 2003; Pridham, 2001; Woofit, 2005), but Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell (1997) believe that students' oral production is a product of direct instruction. This focuses on attention to

form, grammar, practice on certain structures and certain strategies due to the lacks of communicative language teaching (Williams, 1995). This is what we do in our classes, but, we disagree with Williams' opinion with respect to the failures of communicative teaching, because, for us, lacks can be attributed to any type of linguistic method. Habitual practices (Nunan, 1995) are faced with Thompson's view (1996), which implies a shift in traditional methods.

The lack of common agreement on how communicative performance is acquired (Ellis, 1994; Leather & James, 1991) may lead to the consideration that linguistic skills are something that learners get in an individualized way. Instruction, on the other hand, as Schmidt (1995) points out, provides a setting, tasks, and words (Lynch, 1996; Thompson, 1996). Instruction uses different interactions, activities and affect (Krashen and Terrell, 1983) by means of which the students learn different skills.

Nowadays, there is also a conscious arrival of awareness of grammar (Schmidt, 1995), something our students demand in class, because it is not possible to transmit messages without structure. As Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell (1997) suggest, instructional teaching will implement towards form and not to process, since the separation between the conscious and the spontaneous is becoming gradually narrowed (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

The task-based approach: the link between integrative and communicative teaching

The publication of methods on speaking skills in the last years has been surprising (Nunan and Miller, 1995; Bailey and Savage, 1994), although, in our opinion, it is difficult to separate the four linguistic skills (Ellis, 1994; Lynch, 1996).

An important part of teaching communication is the task approach: "Tasks lend them-

selves to stimulating, intellectually challenging materials, especially those of a problem-solving nature, and of a kind which seem meaningful to teachers planning and implementing lessons" (Long, 1990:36). By means of the task-based approach, students may become autonomous learners. For Prabhu (1987), constructing a bank of communicative-problem based activities is a starting point to develop conversational behaviour. In Corder's opinion (1990), language-learning does not keep relation with innate abilities, but with motivation and attitude. We believe that communicative-learning is connected with the affective bond towards the subject of study, but, also with the linguistic skills every learner has.

Tasks are graduated to the student level and follow a progressively-ascending sequence (Candlin, 1987; Anderson and Lynch, 1988). Nunan (1988), however, considers the existence of different opinions with respect to linguistic difficulty between teachers and learners. Lexis and grammar are components of the task-based approach, but they appear as part of authentic communication of meaning and also as factors in social constructions produced independently both by teachers and students (Stern, 1984). In this way classroom activities are made up of several tasks (Breen, 1987; Corder, 1990:115).

In relation to tasks Brown et al. (1984), who separate the tasks which imply transmission of information usually coming from prescribed language (static tasks) from the ones which convey a double or multiple channel of conversation. We follow Nation (1990), who establishes a further division among experience, shared, guided and independent tasks. The first apply to the learner's previous knowledge; the second implies the contact between the experience of two speakers and how their interaction fills up the learning gaps; in the third type, the student is guided along the learning process by especially designed exercises and proposals

made by the teacher; finally, in the fourth type, the learner is free to display his or her previously acquired knowledge without any type of help.

Oral communication and role-plays

According to Lubecka (1996: 98): “Facing the new and the unknown, which happens while communicating with strangers, is a process marked with the feelings of both anxiety and uncertainty”. This author recommends filling in the gap between the two parties in order to overcome both the fear to be negatively judged and the inability to predict and react to our interlocutors.

Obviously there is a continuous feedback between speakers and also between these and listeners, the teacher and the rest of classmates. As Lubecka (1986:100) points out: “The first role of the teacher while listening to his or her students communication act must be the transmission of security, self-confidence and respect.”

Dramatic or role-playing activities imply a varied set of activities (Littlewood, 1981) to be chosen by the learners: playing memorized or cued dialogues, carrying out role-playing, contextualising drills and, finally, improvising. Although all these examples imply role-play, some of them are more creative than others, so that learners can make more mistakes. The teacher, in this situation, should not interrupt the activity to correct mistakes continually. However, an advantage of correcting the students in these situations is that the learner does not feel that he is being corrected himself, but the character he is representing.

Role plays are more stressful than interviews in Halleck's opinion (1995). We believe that this depends on the class atmosphere and if a shy student is playing a role with his or her friends in a representation, he or she may be more relaxed than in the oral interview.

We agree with Stern (1983) in that they may be very effective to provide motivation and lower the feeling of rejection. Apart from that, role-play cases seem to transform the foreign language class, the role-play class, in a class role-play, an advantage that other types of classes cannot use. In this way, the foreign language class seems to be transformed in a socializing and dramatic classroom with group communicative needs, which eliminates the cultural shock. As a result, students learn a new language and deal with various ordinary-life situations, which makes them flexible, cooperative, communicative and, finally, more socially-skilled.

For Crookall and Oxford (1990: 15) role-plays become reality. At the same time, the real world becomes fiction (Black, 1995; Jones, 1982, 1985 & 1987). Role-plays convey some advantages, among which we can mention:

- similarity with real-life situations which relates to something else than the classroom walls (McArthur, 1983:101)
- increase in motivation (Jones, 1982; Stern, 1980)
- dismantle the teacher-student-classroom relation (Sharrock and Watson, 1985)
- getting to know and narrowing the ties with the target culture (Oxford et al., 1990)
- diminish anxiety, since learning becomes a role-play (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982; Krashen, 1982)

Littlejohn (1990:125) suggests that “*the use of role-plays as a testing device is . . . an important development since it should be possible to replicate the situations in which learners will have to use the language*”. In this author's opinion, another advantage is that language is considered not only as a product, but as a process. At the same time, we can see, not only imagine, how the student will do in the real world (Littlejohn, 1990:128).

Jones (1982: 4-5) considers role-plays have three components:

- reality of function, because participants have to accept their roles mentally and behaviourally
- simulated environment through realia which tries to link with 'life out there'
- structure which departs from a set of problems that evolve

Living conveys relating with people, and that is why role-playing adapts perfectly to life: it means listening, answering, agreeing, disagreeing, expressing surprise, etc. Role-playing is perhaps the best way to be humanistic in the language class, because social relations are a need of the human being (Halapý and Saunders, 2002; Shearer and Davidhizar, 2003; Squint, 2002). People are usually defined by his or her relationships with others, so this implies that self-expression is only to first step to communication.

The assessment of oral tests to evaluate language in action becomes a problem when compared to written proficiency evaluation. Perhaps, in these, linguistic skills are assessed in a more realistic way, but there are some psychological factors that are undoubtedly increased: nervousness and fear to stammer, not to be persuasive when talking, etc. This implies that in oral assessment the student has to face linguistic and non-linguistic problems. For Madsen (1983, 147), the assessment of oral skills "is widely regarded as the most challenging of all language exams to prepare, administer, and score". Setting up criteria for these tests and for their administration and making them resemble real-life situations are only some of the problems teachers have to face in oral tests (Hughes, 1989; Littlejohn, 1990; McClean, 1995).

Method

The objective of our experience is to pinpoint the differences in the oral production of two types of students, integrative teaching or communicatively trained ones. The students described in this paper belong to the School of Aeronautical Engineers of Madrid (UPM), Spain. The ages of the students are between 20 and 23 years old and both groups attended the optional course of 60 hours called *Idioma Técnico Moderno*, focused from two different perspectives: the first one aims at providing general linguistic tools in the English language, handling both comprehension and expression skills. On the other hand, the second group was targeted to oral production.

The students enrolled in the communicative group seemed to be more self-confident or extroverted at first sight, whereas the ones registered in the integrative teaching group did not like to participate in oral activities. However, they were told that verbal production was going to appear in the course, fact which was not accepted willingly.

The subsequent class discussion in both groups revealed that the two handicaps which inhibit oral participation in some of our students were anxiety and shyness. The students, mainly those belonging to the integrative teaching group, admitted that they were not worried about hard work, but that they preferred to work anonymously and that they did not like being the focus of attention in the classroom.

We, as teachers have taken advantage of the students' consciousness of the upcoming assessment to develop their motivation, goals and general learning.

As we have said before, our oral practices in class flesh out mainly in role-play cases based upon the task approach. Assessing oral tests to evaluate language in action becomes a problem when compared to written proficiency exams. The following parameters have been considered as the most outstanding in relation to linguistic competence:

- a- knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary
- b- keeping to the rules of speaking
- c- using and responding to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks and invitations
- d- recognizing how to use language
- e- perceiving and transmitting information through extralinguistic features (dress and hair style, postures, manners...)
- f- grasping paralinguistic features (intonation, pitch, facial expressions, gaze, gestures, movements...)

The experience carried out in class, is, in a certain way, more relaxing than other oral practices, since our students talk among themselves and not with a stranger who is going to select or refuse them for a certain position. From this perspective, our students are not confronted with a stranger that interviews and assesses them directly: in our concrete experience the students interact with one another, placing the participants in the oral activity at the same level. Obviously in class, there is a continuous feedback between speakers and also between these and listeners, the teacher and the rest of classmates.

The topic of the experience and the tasks to develop were told at the moment the experience began: they were going to work in groups of five in the simulation of a presentation of a turboprop engine. In this way, the total number of 48 students was split in 10 groups, five for the communicative and five for the holistic approach. There were two communicative groups composed of just four students. The participants should play the following roles: two persons working for an aeronautical company were going to give the presentation, and three other participants should play the role of potential customers attending the presentation.

The topic was enunciated as follows: the sales managers of an aeronautical company are going to give a presentation to launch a new turboprop engine. The presentation

should cover the main features of the product and emphasize the following advantages: reliability, durability and low-cost maintenance. The counterpart, the three would-be buyers have to make questions about the pros and cons in comparison to other already-existing models in the market and have to question the high price of the product. The tasks the students should take into account are:

- welcome everybody
- introduce the subject
- mention handouts or graphics
- outline the purpose and structure of the presentation
- present some statistics
- sum up the statistics and their significance
- comment on market trends and needs of the aeronautical industry
- outline the major benefits of the new turboprop model
- invite questions
- sum up the advantages of the new turboprop
- thanks and conclude

Results

Traditional assessments of oral production have taken language excerpts and have labelled them as good, average, or poor. In our case, in order to implement oral assessment as objectively as possible, the tendencies to both giving a general mark and to help students by prompting them until the right sentence is reached were eliminated. As far as possible, we have tried the measurement instrument was not the teacher, but the effectiveness and independency in task performance. Assessment was divided into different categories: grammar/vocabulary, rules of speaking, general use of language, speech acts, relation between content and language, listening and interaction with the other speakers, pace/fluency/cohesion, paralinguistic features, extralinguistic features, and voice volume. The different categories were

assigned the same value, 10 point each, which made up a total of 100 points. In this way, mispronounced words, grammatical mistakes, wrong choice of words, etc. were assigned a point value, in between minus 0.5 and minus 1 depending upon the type of mistake. Consequently, the value was deducted from the students mark. Later on, the students were given a copy of the assessment sheet with the mistakes made in each category, some other comments and the mark.

Our previous and logical assumption was that the students in the communicative group were going to obtain a much higher marking than the students trained in the integrative teaching class, but the result has not been so contrastive as we had expected, perhaps, because integrative teaching fosters the use of general linguistic skills which influence and benefit mutually. From this point of view, our experience in class is that it is difficult to isolate the teaching of one skill from the others, which takes us to the thought that reading, for example, interacts and brings a lot of advantages to the other skills.

However, the objective assessment has shown that, even though communicative students master communicative techniques better than the integrative teaching group, the latter are much more skilled in regard to the use of grammar, a very important linguistic parameter. From what we have seen grammar and paralinguistic features are the most contrastive parameters among the two groups, as shown in the tables below:

1. Objective marking of students in the integrative group:

mean marking of the group	5.5
grammar/vocabulary	6.9
rules of speaking	5.2
use of language	5.4
speech acts	5.0
content/language	5.6
listening/interaction	5.3
pace/fluency/cohesion	5.1
paralinguistic features	5.3
extralinguistic features	6.0
voice volume	5.6

Table 1. Objective marking of students in the integrative group

2. Objective marking of students in the communicative group:

mean marking of the group	6.1
grammar/vocabulary	5.1
rules of speaking	5.9
use of language	5.7
speech acts	5.6
content/language	5.9
listening/interaction	6.9
pace/fluency/cohesion	5.8
paralinguistic features	7.6
extralinguistic features	6.4
voice volume	6.8

Table 2. Objective marking of students in the communicative group

We can see that the students mean marking in the integrative group is 5.5 as opposed to the 6.1 in the communicative group, which does not seem a great difference if we take into account that the second class have been trained in communication strategies. The distinguishing factor really lies in the two parameters mentioned above: use of grammar, with a deviation of 1.8 points in favour of the integrative group, and paralinguistic features, with a difference of 2.3 points signalling the advantage for the communicative students. We would also like to note two other contrastive markings which show the advantage of the communicative group: the interrelation between listening and interaction (1.6) and the volume of voice (1.2). The rest of the parameters show small deviations: rules of speaking (0.7), use of language (0.3), speech acts (0.6), content/language (0.3),

pace/fluency/cohesion (0.7), extralinguistic features (0.4).

We also notice the different behaviour of both groups: communicatively trained students spoke in a natural tone, not stopping their messages despite the mistakes they made (we ignore if the continuity of the discourse was because they did not realize their errors). In contrast, the group of integrative teaching students sometimes stammered and stopped the continuity of the message, either because of nervousness or because they were trying to use the correct structure, etc. In addition, the volume of their discourse was not adequate, perhaps, because of the lack of self-confidence.

The correlation between listening and interaction, and the use of an adequate volume of voice are skills in which the students may be trained but, that can, somehow, be related to self-confidence or, on the contrary, to anxiety. Paralinguistic features may even be more clearly related to psychological or sociological factors than the other two parameters, which shows the strong bond between linguistic production and non-linguistic elements. The influence of the latter on verbal output is a factor whose reality cannot be denied. According to Curran (1972) many foreign language students feel anxious and nervous about learning a foreign language, negative factors which, undoubtedly, lead to worsening the output conditions in the classroom and, also, in the real word practice, when simulations and role-plays become realities.

Discussion

Assessment of oral production carried out through role-plays has shown that, even though communicative students master communicative techniques better than the integrative teaching group, the latter are more skilled in grammar. This and paralinguistic features have turned out as the most contrastive parameters among the two groups of students: the ones belonging to the inte-

grative and to the communicative classes. The students mean marking in the integrative group is 5.5 and 6.1 in the communicative group, which does not seem such a contrastive scoring if we take into account the different type of training. We believe the reason for this is that integrative teaching fosters the use of linguistic skills which interact mutually.

The contrastive elements are the two parameters mentioned above: use of grammar, (1.8 + integrative group), and paralinguistic features, (2.3 + communicative group). Apart from those there are also two other contrastive scorings which signal the advantage of the communicative group: the interrelation between listening and interaction (1.6) and the volume of voice (1.2).

Our opinion is that we can link the parameters that the communicatively-trained students master better with psychological or social skills rather than with purely linguistic factors. We wonder if the master of these parameters comes from the training in class, if they are really acquired skills through the teaching and learning interaction or if they are innate abilities of some students. Linguistic and social abilities can be taught in the language class, but the psychological factor (shyness, fear to talk in public, stammering, etc.) is something harder to change in the students behaviour. The influence of this factor on oral production is obvious since it is the aspect which signals the difference between integrative and communicatively-trained students. In contrast, the latter group of students show a poorer command of grammatical structures, linguistic lack which may be more easily solved than psychological fears. Perhaps the collaboration of language teachers and psychologists in the oral expression class may turn the teaching of communication into a mixed ability class in which linguistic and non-linguistic skills interact and benefit mutually creating a new integrative teaching: the integrative-ability communication class.

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